

Debate over values education rocks nation's classrooms

By Emily Morrison

The notion of teaching moral or civic values, although not a novel one, issues stridently from the lips of parents, educators and politicians alike these days — yet no consensus seems to have emerged on how to define even the most basic tenets of the premise that values may indeed be a teachable discipline.

"The simple question, 'Shall we teach values?' can be answered in innumerable ways, all of which are consistent, depending on what we mean by 'we,' what we mean by 'teach' and what we mean by 'values,'" observed Nathan (Neil) Jaschik, chairman of the recent Conference on Civic Values in the Public Schools, an event sponsored this past May by the Commission on Interfaith Cooperation and a host of other local organizations.

Arriving at any plausible answer to such a loaded question, Jaschik acknowledged, is partly a function of concurring on a common definition of terms. "People who think they disagree will find they are in total agreement, once the definitions are clear. Our language is too imprecise to permit full understanding without dialogue, so do not shrink from the task," he continued, during his opening remarks, prior to introducing the conference's keynote speaker, University of Rochester president Dennis O'Brien.

"What do U.S. Secretary of Education William Bennett, Governor Mario Cuomo and (New York state) Education Commissioner Gordon Ambach have in common?" queried the drafters of a brochure distributed by the conference's co-sponsors, which included the Genesee Valley District PTA, Monroe County School Boards Association, University of Rochester Graduate School of Education & Human Development and the Monroe County Human Relations Commission.

"Each (of the above-cited officials) has called upon our schools to renew their commitment to teaching civic values," read the answer, part of an appeal to teachers, counselors, administrators, board members and parents interested in examining the following questions:

- Can civic values be "taught?"
- What is the role of schools in teaching civic values?
- Is there a common set of civic values that should be taught?
- Where in the schools should instruction on civic values occur?
- How does school "climate" affect learning of civic values?
- Which programs really work to teach civic values?
- What is controversial about teaching civic values?

Possible answers to such questions have issued from many concerned parents, government leaders with widely varying opinions on the subject, and all sectors of the educational community.

Governor Cuomo, during a June 5 address to 500 local educators at the Riverside Convention Center, espoused teaching fundamental values, "values at the heart and soul of what we believe as American people," but he made it abundantly clear that he was not advocating the teaching of religion, philosophy, or "ethical humanism, deism or theism." Cuomo has requested that the state Board of Regents develop a statewide curriculum for teaching values in the public schools.

U.S. Secretary of Education Bennett — like Cuomo, a Catholic who is also an outspoken advocate of teaching moral values in the schools — met with Pope John Paul II July



Dennis O'Brien

Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

15 to discuss the teaching of values as well as the instituting of proposed Vatican higher education norms that would give greater administrative control of Catholic universities to the church hierarchy.

In an address he made at the New York State School Boards convention in Rochester last fall, state education commissioner Ambach observed that, because the teaching of values is part of our heritage and therefore central to American education, it should begin at the earliest grades and continue to build more sophisticated understanding and deeper commitment in later years.

Rochester Teachers Association president Adam Urbanski has proposed that the school district offer a course on values, in which students would earn academic credit through community service work or tutoring of fellow students. Such practical experience might instill in young people an awareness of the need for justice and equality in society, Urbanski stated on the occasion of Cuomo's June 5 acceptance of the Friend to Education Award from the Monroe County Federation of Teachers.

Sister Virginia Steinwachs, assistant superintendent of Catholic schools for the Diocese of Rochester — pointing to the dilemmas facing public school teachers and administrators who wish to institute values programs — contrasts

their plight with the relative lack of such problems among Catholic educators.

Following the example of Sister Loretta Carey and Sister Joan Hart of Fordham University, who have pioneered the "infusion method" of introducing Gospel values into regular course work in existing Catholic elementary and secondary school curricula, Sister Steinwachs has employed this approach to teaching values in her peace- and justice-education work in diocesan schools.

"Our whole Catholic system is built on teaching Gospel values," Sister Steinwachs observes. "There is a great movement among all educators to teach peace and justice values, but they're very much curtailed by the concept of separation of church and state. There's a very fine line," she adds. "When I meet with public school people, I see a great willingness to teach values, but they're often afraid to get down to it."

While she cautions that it's important to distinguish between teaching specific issues on which the educator takes a stand and attempts to offer a more general perspective, Sister Steinwachs does acknowledge that the program was once criticized because some parents of high school students were afraid certain values might be foisted on their children. Now, however, she observes, "I think we diffuse any kind

of (parental) upset by stressing the fact that we're teaching Gospel values.

"Even in Catholic schools, you can't tag values — or religion — onto everything. It has to be a natural flow, as with the infusion method. And I try to stress Gospel values. Human dignity (social justice) and peace are the two 'umbrella' Gospel values that all the rest are grouped under."

Sister Steinwachs is also a member of the board of directors of EPIC (Effective Parenting Information for Children), a non-profit program whose focus is on developing self-esteem, decision-making skills and responsible behavior in children and, by extension, their parents. Established 16 years ago in Buffalo — where the program once came under fire from critics who perceived that coordinators were trying to instill moral values — EPIC is now in its sixth year in Rochester, where it is currently receiving a great deal of civic support, according to Sister Steinwachs.

Used in more than 50 schools in western New York — including 10 Catholic schools within the Diocese of Rochester — the EPIC program deals with the three most powerful influences on children: home, school and community. EPIC's program coordinator, Marilyn Parks, along with volunteer coordinator Marcie Unger and community coordinator Mary Louise Musler, led one of 11 workshops offered during the day-long Conference on Civic Values in the Public Schools, held May 8 at Gates-Chili High School.

Other conference workshops examined the constitutional perspective on teaching civic values; improving moral reasoning; school governance and civic values; legal issues in the classroom; school boards and policy making; value messages from the outside world; community service and civic values; and ethical issues in work settings.

Dr. Gil Gockley, a counselor in the Pittsford school system, offered a workshop in which he discussed his newly published elementary school curricular program, "Classroom Super Teams," which focuses on enhancing self-esteem and civic responsibility in children. Representatives of the School Without Walls, part of the Rochester City School District, presented an overview of their civic values program, while Eldridge McClaney, faculty coordinator of the Wilson Magnet School's year-old student court, provided an overview of the court's operations.

Perhaps earlier in the morning than some participants were able to fully engage their intellects in a reasoned philosophical treatise, UR president Dennis O'Brien delivered a scintillating and challenging keynote address to the gathered company in the Gates-Chili auditorium.

"Problem," he began. "There must be some sort of problem about teaching values in schools these days; otherwise we wouldn't have conferences like this one. Public testimony on the problem is abundant — one can hardly go a day without some official report from Washington or a prestigious foundation lamenting the loss of values education in American schools, colleges and universities.

"Letters to the editors of the daily paper offer a shrill chorus of complaints about the sad state of moral education, and when complaining won't do, you are very likely to be sued by some morally earnest petitioner who thinks that the school has destroyed the foundation of society," he went on.

It makes no difference, O'Brien observed, **Continued on facing page**



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